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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides specific, workable suggestions for parents in helping them create the best atmosphere they can for developing their childrens' reading. The booklet begins with general principles for establishing a home reading program, and continues with a checklist of fifty specific suggestions for parents on helping their children become better readers, including general activities in the home, library related experiences, prereading activities, and school activities. The next section consists of questions asked by parents about reading, along with the answers. The booklet concludes with points to be considered by parents when planning an interview with the child's teacher. (EL)

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Children's Reading:

What Parents Can Do to Help

Extension Division-University of Missouri-Columbia

Program of Continuing Professional Education

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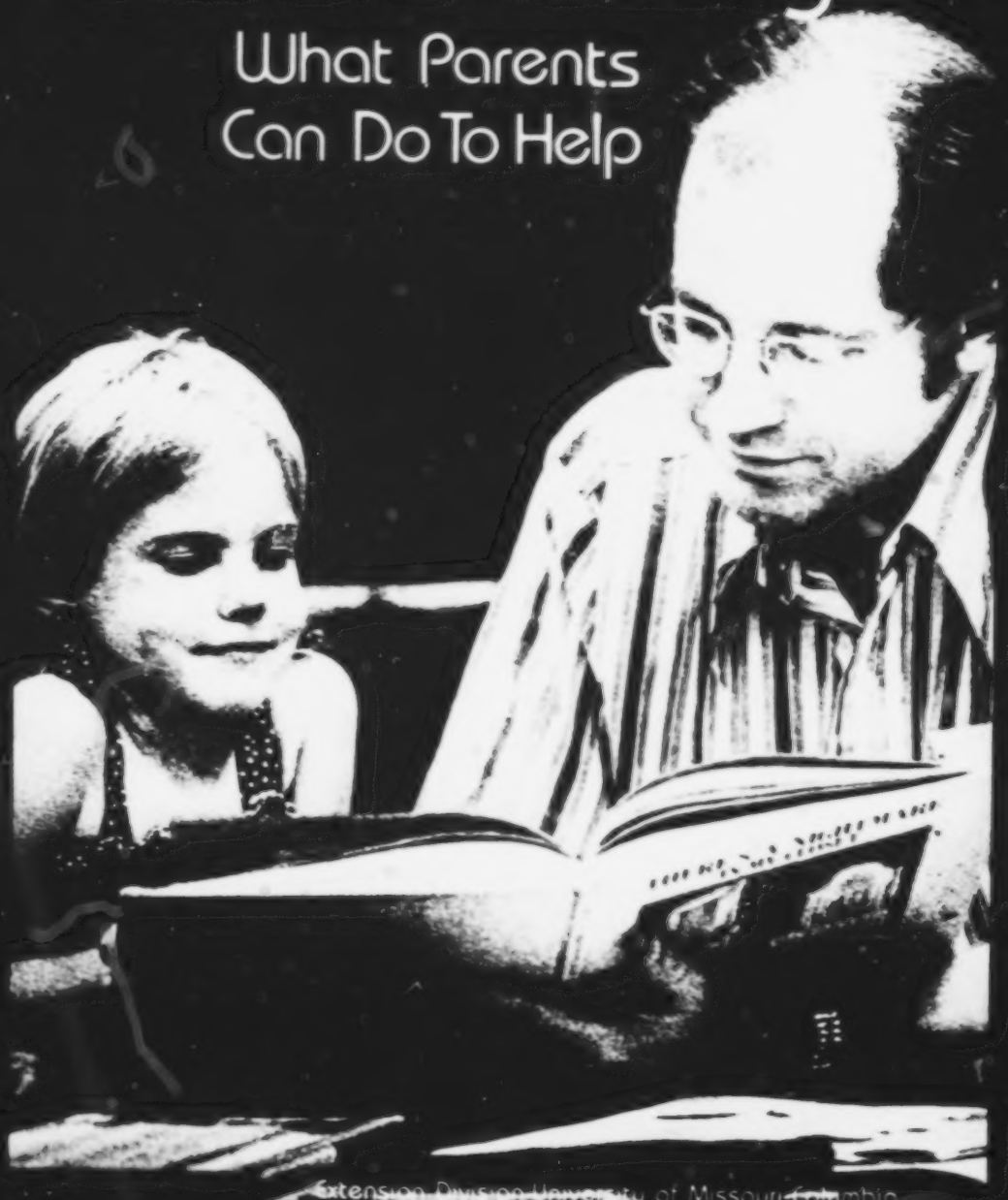

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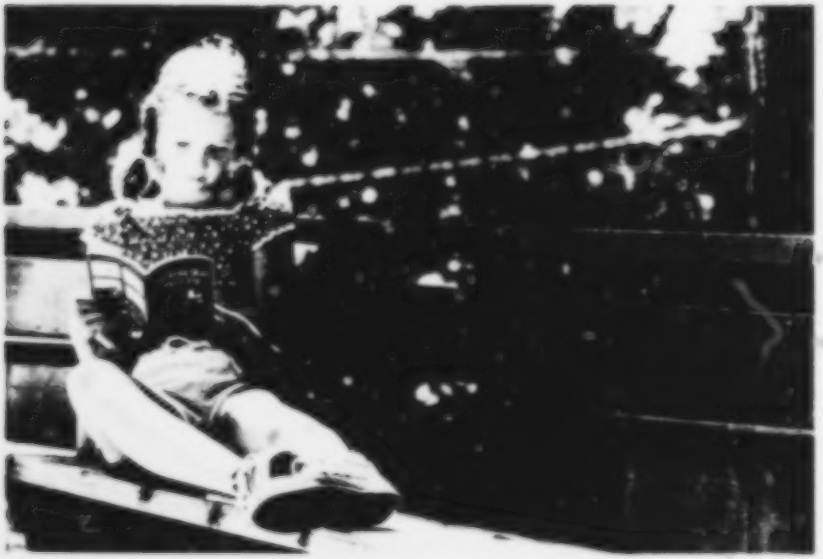
Introduction

The role parents play in helping their children become good readers cannot be overemphasized. While the local school still has the major responsibility for the actual teaching of formal reading, its program can accomplish little, if anything, without the strong support of the home. Any experienced elementary teacher can tell you how easy it is to identify those children who have been exposed to a family situation that has encouraged a love for reading. These students more often than not are the ones who excel at all of their schoolwork.

The purpose of this booklet is to provide specific, workable suggestions for parents in helping them create the best atmosphere they can for developing their children's reading. In establishing a home reading program it is often mistakenly assumed that a great deal of money is required. Quite the contrary is true, because it is not how much a parent can spend but rather the degree of interest and concern that makes the difference. You will find almost all of the suggestions presented here require little, if any money.



General Principles for Establishing A Home Reading Program

Parents who want to help their children become better readers should be aware of certain principles which will determine to a great extent the eventual success or failure of their efforts. The following points should be kept in mind when reading activities take place in the home.

The most important goal of any reading program should be the development of a love for reading.

A neighbor of mine once remarked that he hated to read a book because he always felt he needed to write a book report on what he had read. Perhaps he was only joking, but it is unfortunate to note the number of adults who associate reading with unpleasant experiences from their early schooling. Ask any kindergarten or first-grade student why they are going to school, and more

often than not, they will reply, "to learn to read." Yet, this enthusiasm does not always last as it should.

Any home reading activity should have as its ultimate goal the development of a love for reading. At the point when reading becomes a chore or an unpleasant experience for the child, it should be ended until a time when you realize the child is ready to continue.

Reading should never be used as a disciplinary measure when children misbehave because if it is followed on a regular basis, reading will quickly become associated in the child's thinking with unpleasant experiences. It would be much better for the parent to use reading as a reward for good behavior instead.

Successful reading is not just saying all the words correctly but also understanding what is read.

Traditionally, teachers and parents have defined a good reader as one who can say every word correctly. Less emphasis was placed on understanding what was being read. Today, this lack of concern for comprehension is being questioned by many in the field of reading education. While being able to say the word correctly is important, it is even more critical for the reader to know what the word means.

Stress on the child knowing what the words mean has tremendous implications for the parents. Besides having a child simply say the words on the page, the parent needs to ask the child various types of questions to be sure understanding is taking place. Comprehension can be checked using simple fact questions such as asking characters' names, events in the story, etc. In addition, the reader should be given the opportunity to express his opinions and feelings about the material. Critical comprehension skills are often overlooked which results in readers who only are able to answer fact questions.

For comprehension to take place, a child should be exposed to as many and varied experiences as possible by the parent. The young person who has been to the zoo, a farm, or the airport is, of course, in a much better position to respond correctly when he encounters these on a page. Thus, the parents who are willing to provide a rich and varied background of experiences for their children are really preparing them to become better readers when they begin formal instruction.

There can be no better reading example for a child to follow than a parent who frequently reads in the home.

While the school will have an important influence on the child's formal reading education, the eventual success or failure of this endeavor often will be determined to a large degree by the attitude of the parents themselves toward reading. Those children who come from a home that includes parents who read for pleasure and enjoyment no doubt will also like to read. The best approach for encouraging children to read is simply parents who themselves enjoy reading.

50 Specific Suggestions for Parents On Helping Their Children Become Better Readers

The following checklist can be used by parents as a measure of their efforts in helping their children become better readers. These activities have been divided according to purpose.

General Activities

_____ 1. I let my children see me enjoy reading from a wide variety of materials such as newspapers, books, magazines, etc.

_____ 2. I see that each child has a personal bookshelf or space for storing his or her reading material. (This can be as simple as a board on two bricks or a cardboard box.

_____ 3. I try to arrange some time each day when I can read to my children even if they are able to read themselves. (You can select materials which interest them but are written at a level above the child's current ability.)

_____ 4. I do not compare the progress of one of my children with any other child. (Each individual has unique abilities and interests which should be respected.)

_____ 5. I show an interest in my children's reading, helping them to select appropriate reading material.

_____ 6. I make a special effort to praise a child when he or she shows improvement no matter how small the gain. (We all will strive to succeed when we know this progress will be favorably received.)

_____ 7. I check my child's comprehension of the story by asking questions following his or her reading. Several types of questions might be asked such as the following:

_____ 8. I ask fact questions:
What were the characters' names?
Where did the story take place?
How many animals were in the story?

_____ 9. I ask sequence questions:
What came first, second, etc. in the story?
What followed a certain activity in the reading?

_____ 10. I ask critical questions:
How did you like the story?
What do you think happened after the story ended?
Would you have liked to be one of the characters in the story? Why?

_____ 11. I encourage my children to ask questions about the reading they are doing.

_____ 12. If possible, I provide a dictionary written at the child's reading level and encourage its use.

_____ 13. I try to schedule each child's activities throughout the day to include reading.

_____ 14. Because each child's health is of prime importance for success in reading (especially vision and hearing), I schedule physical examinations at regular periods.

_____ 15. I am aware of any symptoms which may indicate a significant change in current health.

_____ 16. I am aware of the television programs watched by my children and encourage scheduled time for reading.

_____ 17. I try to relate television viewing to reading such as suggesting the newspaper as a good source of current events.

_____ 18. I purchase a newspaper daily and encourage the children to read what interests them each day.

_____ 19. Books and magazines are an important part of my gift-giving for each child.

_____ 20. When traveling, I point out opportunities for reading such as highway signs, maps, menus, etc.

_____ 21. I relate the importance of reading to the real world of work and life so that children will see this relationship in me.

_____ 22. I provide at least one general source for checking facts such as an inexpensive encyclopedia or almanac.

_____ 23. To encourage a love for reading is one of the prime goals of all my home reading activities.

Library Related Experiences

_____ 24. I have a library card and am willing to get one for each of my children whenever they are eligible for one.

_____ 25. I take my children to the library whenever possible.

_____ 26. I make each trip to the library an exciting adventure of discovery.

_____ 27. I make sure that special parts of the library, such as the card catalog and the reference materials, are clearly explained.

_____ 28. All of the children are encouraged to select and to borrow at least one book every time we go to the library.

_____ 29. The materials obtained at the library are made an important part of our home reading activities.

_____ 30. I do not try to impose my interests on book selection but rather respect the choices of my children within the bounds of reason.

Prereading Activities

____ 31. I give my children every opportunity to express themselves, whether it be through talking, art activities, or play experiences.

____ 32. I am a concerned and interested listener showing my children that their feelings and interests are important to me.

____ 33. I encourage playing word games related to reading. (These might include such simple activities as trying to think of rhyming words, words with the same beginning or ending sounds, and various words to describe such occurrences as snow.)

_____ 34. I provide the opportunity for the children to visit a variety of places in the community. These might include the zoo, train station, airport, fire station, etc.

_____ 35. We play informal games which encourage the child to see differences and likenesses in objects in the home. This would include size, shape, color, etc.

_____ 36. I place special emphasis on reading to my children at this beginning stage in reading so they can experience the enjoyment possible in this activity.

_____ 37. Reading-related activities are never used as a means for punishment.

_____ 38. Material is provided, whether it is a small magnetic blackboard or just a pencil and paper, for experience in writing letters and words encountered in the child's reading.

_____ 39. The amount of reading time never exceeds the child's interest span.

School Activities

_____ 40. I show an active interest in what my children tell me about their school activities.

_____ 41. I know my children's teachers and encourage good communication between home and school.

_____ 42. When asked to visit at school, I am willing to go and cooperate with the teachers.

_____ 43. I am willing to provide the school with needed information on my children. This includes health, social, and psychological data which may help my children's teachers do a better job of teaching reading.

_____ 44. I take an active part in the PTA programs of my children's schools.

_____ 45. I encourage the local school district to allocate sufficient funds for the purchase of library and related materials associated with the reading program.

_____ 46. I see that a scheduled time is provided each day for my children to read school-assigned material uninterrupted by television, the telephone, or other distractions.

_____ 47. I take an active interest in my children's efforts in reading, not expecting unrealistic progress.

_____ 48. I try to relate home reading activities to those that are taking place at school.

_____ 49. I see that my children receive sufficient rest so that they will be able to do their best in school each day.

_____ 50. I am knowledgeable about the grading practices in my children's school and when in doubt I am willing to contact the teacher.

Questions Often Asked By Parents About Reading

The teaching of reading in today's elementary schools is often a mystery to many parents. Remembering their own experience in learning to read, today's parents frequently wonder if anything has changed in reading education since they were students. The following questions reflect concerns expressed by parents on various aspects of reading instruction.

1. Is phonics being taught today as part of a good reading program?

A simple answer to this question is, "Yes, phonics is an important part of all reading programs." Textbook publishers do differ on the place certain

phonics skills are introduced and the amount of material presented in their individual programs.

It should be remembered that phonics is really only one part of word analysis or the method a child uses to pronounce a new word encountered in reading a textbook passage. Other word analysis skills include the way a word is shaped, studying context, and the use of a dictionary.

An important point to remember is the fact that simply using phonics to say a new word is only part of the process. The reader must also be able to identify what the word means. It does little good to be able to say the word "kiwi" if you do not know it is an Australian bird.

2. What is a remedial reader? How is this student identified?

As defined by most reading teachers, a remedial reader is the student who is reading below his expected achievement. Stated in another way, the remedial reader is the boy or girl who gives every indication of being able to read much better than he or she is currently doing. They seem to have the skills necessary for reading but for some reason are not using them.

There are several ways of determining who the students are who seem to fit this category. Perhaps the most common method is to compare reading achievement, number of years in school, and capacity or intelligence. While this procedure will give some indication of the level on which a reader should currently be reading, any result must be in light of the teacher's judgment. The perceptive opinion of a good classroom teacher almost always gives better results than any other measure.

3. My child has been sent to the special reading teacher for extra work. Why has this been done?

Many schools now employ a teacher who has primary responsibility for the total reading program in a school. Among her many duties is the role of assisting the classroom teacher with those students who are having particular problems in the regular reading instruction.

A student is selected for work with the special reading teacher only after careful consideration has been given to current reading ability, test scores, and the teacher's judgment. The primary objective of reading specialists is to provide the necessary individual and small group work so that the students can return to the regular class. In a sense the special reading teacher is working to get all of her students back in class, and thus her goal is to eliminate her own job.

4. Wouldn't my child's reading program be a great deal better if the school would just buy some new reading materials?

While materials are an important part of all good reading programs, they are not the key element for success. It certainly would be nice if there was one method or set of materials that would enable every student to become a good reader, but unfortunately these do not exist. Most research in reading has identified the qualified classroom teacher as the most critical factor in any successful reading program. Materials, no matter how good they may be, are only as valuable as the competency of the teacher using them.

5. What is the most important thing a parent can do to help his children become good readers?

Parents who like to read and are able to convey this feeling of pleasure to their children are performing the most important activity to help foster a love for reading.

The Parent-Teacher Interview

In almost all school systems parents are invited to visit their children's teachers. Unfortunately, parents often view these meetings with a great deal of concern. They mistakenly believe the only purpose of these contacts is to provide the teacher with an opportunity to point out classroom problems with their children. While a discussion of a child's particular learning difficulties may be a part of the meeting, the negative aspects never must be allowed to become the dominant theme.

Perhaps the most important outcome of any parent-teacher meeting is the establishment of better communication and a clear understanding of the goals and objectives considered important for each individual child. Without this partnership between the home and the school, very little can be accomplished.

The following points should be considered when planning a visit with your child's teacher.

1. You should have a clear understanding of the reasons for the meeting from school officials and teachers.
2. The ultimate goal of the meeting should be to find specific ideas and measures which both the parents and the teacher can undertake in a cooperative program between the school and the home for the benefit of the child.
3. All educational terms, concepts, and problem areas discussed by the teacher should be clearly explained. The prime reason for the parent-teacher meeting is to foster clear communication, and this can only take place when each participant understands the other. Parents should not hesitate to ask questions at any time.
4. You should be prepared to help the teacher with relevant information about your child's home life which will aid in more effective classroom instruction.
5. Suggestions for appropriate home study activities should be discussed with the teacher. These might include helping figure the amount of homework, time to be spent studying, appropriate library materials to use, etc. Also, the teacher's suggestions of recreational reading material could be very helpful.

About the Author

Richard D. Robinson, professor of Education at the University of Missouri-Columbia, has a dual appointment in the departments of continuing professional education and curriculum and instruction.

He received his doctorate in reading education from the University of Georgia in 1971. Presently, he is working with school districts throughout Missouri on evaluation and implementation of reading programs.

This monograph is one of a continuing cooperative effort between the College of Education and the Extension Division at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The basic intent of these continuing education monographs is to bring the specialized knowledge, expertise, and perceptions of the faculty of the College to bear upon issues and concerns relating to the educational system. The focus is intended to be practical even though it emanates from a theoretical structure.

It is hoped that these monographs will provide useful and valid information which will be of benefit to practicing educators and their constituents.

In this monograph Professor Robinson provides some keen insight into the relationships between the formal school setting and the home and family unit as these relationships impact upon the educational welfare of the child. In addition, he provides many useful and practical suggestions for parents which will not only enhance the success of the child in the school reading program, but which will also result in an inherent feeling of accomplishment on the part of the youngsters themselves, and through this, a feeling of satisfaction for the parents.

It is now well documented that the nature of the home environment has a direct and heavy relationship to the accomplishment of learning tasks and opportunities at school. Therefore, while continual improvements should be made in the teaching and learning process in the formal school setting, it is likely that significant strides can be made through the enhancement of the home environment and through targeted and constructive efforts of parents to share some part of the responsibility for the learning tasks. This booklet should be referred to often by all parents.

Charles H. Koelling
Assistant Dean
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University of Missouri-Columbia

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